

32 Nights

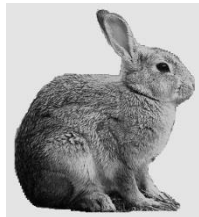


Keith Tuma

Smithereens Press

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Smithereens Press 16

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is first published by Smithereens Press

<http://smithereenspress.com>

on 07th July 2016.

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Cover image by Keith Tuma.

Author photograph by Diane Tuma.

Text set in Calibri 12 point.

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Dream of the cardboard stacked high: a surgical theatre for wasps. No audience. No patience. I catch sight of newspapers and everything becomes clear. The heat.

Dream of the victims: their heads pumpkins the day after Halloween.
Hoodlums who know their business. Amateurs whose hearts are in the
right place. A phone rings. The gun appears.

Dream of the poetry reading: eyes down in the audience, bored feet, smuggled phones. Someone nudges me so I notice the grimace: the host's. Students responsive like Moscow in January.

Dream of Huns striding: they urinate in the garden and call it rain. The wrong era and the wrong place: too familiar. Digging for roots, warming animal flesh between thighs. Shirts rot on their backs. Then tourists descend from the cruise ships.

Dream of the hydrangea powdered by drought, confetti on dirt: "It's Barry, I'm a phone salesman now. What has it been, forty years? I thought you were dead!" Dried up and ringing.

Dream of the last noodle, a fragment: pasta bowl on expensive white tablecloth. They've taken the silverware.

Dream of the committee meeting: gentle, speculative people pursuing full spectrum dominance. I put on a bathrobe to watch pond scum netted on somebody else's property, breakfast for mosquitoes.

Dream of the working girls of Waldoboro: dead for decades, their photographs above the booth. The oldest diner in Maine. Blueberry pie. Reagan said, "Gentlemen, we hit the jackpot."

Dream of the downspouts: copper gone for heroin, thieves like cats on a cold glass roof. The Gaslight District. Film noir. Down a dark street to the beer hall, a friend telling me of an ice cream shop held up with handguns.

Dream of the detectable warning surfaces: corporate language for rubber meets the road. Butterfly guts mustard on my windshield I pull off: the homeless on all four corners.

Dream of the blue light, rubbed between hands until the genie appears: "What do you want?" "What's rightfully mine. The sun to shine, the seeds to sprout." "Too bad," the genie says, "I don't work for Monsanto."

Dream of the cops: fast fists, jaws like Jimmy Cagney. Military gear. Then limping, possibly a prosthetic leg. Barry says, "This is not Big Rock Candy Mountain!" A crowd chanting something I can't make out. "It's okay," Barry says, "I'm still white."

Dream of the white bear climbing into the orchestra: “Wretched humans! Shake off your lethargy! Smash these instruments!” No need to leave the room, the bear says.

Dream of Baghdad: they're murdered for arranging vegetables in a suggestive manner, for failing to diaper their goats. I come upon a stalk of celery gleaming with caviar. I am to be the toast for it. Or one of the goats.

Dream of the road not taken: its scenic overlook. Yellow moon not as bright as expected. One gaping wolf, one grunting cow, barely visible. Regret and murderous opportunity.

Dream of the escape: the hacksaw concealed, a high fence. Bolt cutters. Metal snips. Not a prison of my own devising, not my tools. Lifted as if by crane, removed from my position and carried across the sky. Slow motion. En route. Then dumped.

Dream of the animals: the farmer breaks the cat's back. Now it is out of the way of his mother's feet. Horrible sounds. Then to the barn to see the babies: more than three little pigs.

Dream of New York City: Elmo throws a bolo punch into Spiderman's cup. Balls drop. The show goes on, everything blinking, Barry tearing out the Yellow Pages before we locate the restaurant.

Dream of the green room: a kitchen or faculty lounge before the reading. We sit on a table, three or four of us, talking. Legs buckle. "It's broken," Barry says, his cellphone chirping.

Dream of the woman falling from the tree: spry climbing for high quince. Gash in her forehead, sprawled on the sidewalk. I run for help through a maze of locked yards, over fences. Just a small suture, I think. "Think otherwise," she says.

Dream of the alien: Officer Barry with flashlight at the border. "I don't care who your father is, I don't care what you own. Phone home," he says. His computer the shape of a cantaloupe.

Dream of the Midwestern campus: six million for the new concussion ball warm-up facilities. “When capitalism sucks, this is its tit,” Barry says.

Dream of the rock show: messy acoustics, an old church bouncing sound. I'm standing in the noise, standing between songs. Barry sings along: "There's no disputin' Vladimir Putin."

Dream of the new morality: a flat homeland rolls into conspicuous hills. We drive right over them.

Dream of the political commentator: a roaring fire, the butchered and the spit. Wilds of opinion, well financed. Beautiful losers weeping furiously.

Dream of the mirror: “Stay awhile, I have something I want you to see.” Barry again, seated. “Not you, but who’s behind you.” Donors with winsome smiles. Advocates. Three score and ten dead relatives.

Dream of the afterlife: not to talk about it again. White sycamores in a warm November. Sleek. Pallid. Leafless.

Dream of the pitcher: the catcher changing signs. Something else required: fewer words. Then a meeting on the mound, watching the manager. Then out of the game.

Dream of the prayers and benedictions: a manner of walking. Crowds on the Academy Bridge, September sun. My reflection in that water: others moving across.

Dream of sharks circling: “But free will is a fantasy,” Barry says. Blood in the water, fins and gills. Unconstrained feeding, on one another as the moment requires.

Dream of the ventriloquist's dummy: the museum open by appointment. Several woods in the puppet's construction, a social subject. Possibly a version of Pinocchio, with a broken nose. "Make him tell a lie," Barry says.

Dream of the glass eggs: black and white, yellow ringed in red. A collector's display, reflecting light, cold to the touch. "Why make this? What good is it?" Snow on snow on snow.



Keith Tuma's poetry publications include *Critical Path: Into the Bush* (Casus Belli, 2003, with cris cheek and William R. Howe as Three Little Heretics), *Topical Ointment* (Slack Buddha, 2004), *Holiday in Tikrit* (Critical Documents, 2005, with Justin Katko), and *The Paris Hilton* (Critical Documents, 2008/9).

He is also the author of *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Northwestern UP, 1998) and *On Leave: A Book of Anecdotes* (Salt, 2011), and for a few years worked on a travel photography blog with the artist Billy Simms: <https://proxyholidays.com>. He is the editor or co-editor of four books, including *Anthology of Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

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